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SYMPOSIUM
A GRIDLOCKED WORLD



COSMOPOLITANISM
IN A GRIDLOCKED WORLD

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Cosmopolitanism

In a Gridlocked World

Pietro Maffettone & Marcello Di Paola

In the past sixty years, the international community has achieved unprecedented levels of cooperation in an impressive array of domains, entrenching important principles of global coexistence, securing relatively high levels of peace and stability, and enabling the free movement and exchange of goods, people, wealth, knowledge, and innovation. Today, however, global cooperation is failing, largely incapacitated in the face of pressing challenges such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, financial insecurity, cross-border mass migrations, transnational terrorism, and more.

This failure has deep structural reasons. This is the main claim made by Hale, Held and Young in their excellent book, *Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most*.¹ This number of *Philosophy and Public Issues* convenes leading scholars to discuss that claim and some of its most significant implications for political theory.

Hale, Held and Young develop a simple but far-reaching and widely applicable explanatory argument—that global cooperation is failing due to: an increase in multipolarity following the

¹ Thomas Hale, David Held and Kevin Young, *Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

emergence of new world powers such as China, Brazil and India; the complexity of unprecedented systemic global challenges such as climate change and financial insecurity (among others); the institutional inertia that tends to block readjustments in formal and substantive power distributions; and a simultaneous fragmentation and overlap of responsibilities that makes most attempts at concerted global governance cumbersome and ultimately ineffectual.

These factors are today slowing and sometimes blocking action on many important fronts. They also raise fundamental normative questions about the nature and objectives of international relations in the new millennium—thus probing contemporary global political theory, particularly the cosmopolitan wave that has dominated the field in the last four decades.

I

Cosmopolitanism and Global Political Theory

Cosmopolitan philosophy has been successful in elaborating and defending the general ideal of universal moral equality, and in establishing its political relevance.² All cosmopolitans share the view that each and every human being has equal moral worth and that such worth deserves to be taken into account by political institutions regardless of national, ethnic, social and religious affiliations and differences. There is bound to be considerable disagreement on the exact political implications of such moral

² See Thomas Pogge, “Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty,” 103 *Ethics* 1 (1992), pp. 48–75.

recognition, but there is widespread consensus that it affords at least a minimal protection of basic human rights.³

Cosmopolitan thinkers have also orchestrated a related attack on the traditional notion of state sovereignty—which saw states as originators of their own powers, enjoying untrammelled authority over their subjects,⁴ being wholly unaccountable for their abuses on subjects other than their own, and largely impenetrable to moral and political criticism from either within or without.⁵ All these features, cosmopolitans have argued, become untenable once the “fundamental unit of moral concern”⁶ is understood to be individuals and all individuals equally.

From these premises, cosmopolitans have gone on to suggest alternative models of political organization for both domestic and global politics. At the domestic level, this has usually coincided with a demand for some form of principled delimitation of legitimate government action—typically based on some list of basic human rights, of individuals and populations, which no government could violate. At the global level, suggestions have ranged from a vertical dispersion of sovereignty drawing on ideas of subsidiarity, to proposals for the establishment of supranational democratic governance structures that would recognize the importance of accountability to the people as a

³ See David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ David Held, “Law of States, Law of Peoples,” 8 *Legal Theory* 1, pp. 1–44.

⁵ See Charles Beitz, *The Idea of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ Pogge, “Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty.”

necessary step to respecting and upholding the basic commitment to their equal moral status.⁷

Cosmopolitan thinkers have typically tended to assume that their suggestions for reform were actually realizable—if obviously not at once. They have been faithful to the idea that the continued development of well-functioning and normatively justified global governance institutions was not only desirable but also entirely possible. To be sure, that assumption was always tempered by the sobering realization that diverging national interests would be a constant threat to global cooperation. But the general perspective was that this would mainly reflect a motivational failure: a parochial lack of political will that would inhibit the pursuance of an otherwise normatively clear path. Accordingly, most cosmopolitans have tended to focus on clearing and further defining that path, and to dismiss collisions with reality as pertaining to “non-ideal theory,” which was not their subject.⁸

II

Gridlock

Gridlock: Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most provides global political theory with a series of dark flashes from the real world of contemporary international relations, and with a powerful explanation of its current troubles. In so doing, it forces

⁷ See Daniele Archibugi, Mathias Koenig-Archibugi and Raffaele Marchetti, eds, *Global Democracy: Normative and Empirical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁸ For a discussion see Laura Valentini, *Justice in a Globalized World: A Normative Framework* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

some reconsideration of the typically cosmopolitan assumption of the possibility of institutional progress.

One aspect that those who read *Gridlock* will notice is that it makes little to no reference to motivational factors. As said, the notion that abstract principles can generate institutions that work, and that if those institutions stumble and fail is due to shortcomings in implementation, which are in turn due to motivational failures, has been a typical cosmopolitan leitmotiv. But according to Hale, Held and Young, the main obstacles to global cooperation today lie in the unprecedentedly complex nature of the very issues that need to be confronted, and in the rapidly changing circumstances in which cooperation is required to confront them. In such a predicament, the abstract principles themselves may seem unable to generate functioning institutional regimes.

Consider, as an example, the awkward position in which high aggregate but low per-capita emitting countries (including China, India, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Indonesia and others) find themselves today when trying to negotiate their role in global climate cooperation in a language that cosmopolitans would understand—that of human rights protection. Because these big emitters also host large numbers of highly vulnerable people whose human rights could be violated by climate change, they would enjoy the restrictions posed on industrialized countries by human rights-inspired climate governance, as these would prevent the deaths and suffering of many of their own citizens. However, they would themselves have to submit to these restrictions as their emissions also bring about deaths and suffering both within and beyond their borders. These restrictions would constrain their emissions, thus impeding fossil-fuelled development paths that may in turn serve to protect the human rights of their citizens—or at least of more of their

citizens more quickly. In other words, high aggregate/low per-capita emitting countries that favour human rights-inspired climate governance seem to have a case for appealing to universal principles both in order to obtain global governance arrangements that they recognize as morally desirable and justifiable, *and* in order to obtain a particularistic exemption from these very same arrangements. While in cases like these motivations may be faulty, the problem seems to run much deeper. The unprecedentedly complex nature of today's global problems, and the shifting conditions of the world, make it possible for cosmopolitan principles to justify both a given governance regime and exemptions from it. That is a higher state of gridlock, calling into question the typically cosmopolitan confidence in the possibility of global institutional progress.

Gridlock also highlights other worries. Institutions, including global institutions, can be functionally understood as tools to organize social action in order to achieve morally and politically desirable goals. Whatever else institutions may do, they are first and foremost called on to solve specific coordination problems, and thus make possible outcomes that can only be produced as a result of successful cooperation.⁹ Arguably, then, a necessary feature of a legitimate institution is that it is capable of providing the kinds of moral and political goods that it was instituted to provide. *Gridlock* tells us that global governance institutions today are, in many important cases, structurally unable to do so. Or, different but equally troublesome, that the sorts of goods that the global community needs today are not the ones these institutions were designed to provide (after all, the UN was created to avoid a third world war, not to contrast unprecedented threats like

⁹ Allen Buchanan, *The Heart of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

climate change). In both cases, the legitimacy of global institutions is at risk of being eroded: for why accept and comply with institutions that do not provide the moral and political goods that they were created to provide?

Cosmopolitans themselves, like most other political thinkers of the modern and contemporary era, have been unanimous in denying that political power, authority and legitimacy are God-given. On these views, institutions are created by people and for people: if they fail the people who institute them, as they are failing them today on many important fronts, there ceases to be reason for these institutions to stand. *Gridlock* tells us that the current cooperation breakdown within the many policy domains in which global governance institutions operate is not just a bump on the road: rather, it has deep structural reasons. Because of that, a case could be made that these institutions, at least in their present form, have lost most if not all of their efficacy. Without efficacy, they could (and, according to most political modern and contemporary political theory, also should) progressively lose legitimacy as well.

It is at this juncture that an inconvenient question arises: does the loss of efficacy and legitimacy of institutions that were (at least partly) built on cosmopolitan premises also mean that cosmopolitanism itself should be abandoned?

III

Cosmopolitanism for a Gridlocked World

To counter such conclusion, a cosmopolitan thinker should first show that retaining a gridlocked system built on cosmopolitan premises is still better than losing it. She should then advance proposals on how cosmopolitanism should be

remoulded in order to be of use for global politics in a gridlocked world. It is impossible to adequately confront these large questions here, so we shall limit ourselves to some minimal suggestions on how they could be confronted elsewhere.

Those who see gridlock as a justification for bringing down the present system must shoulder a heavy burden of proof. If doubts about the quality of a system of institutions are motivated by the plight of the oppressed, for example,¹⁰ then one needs to look into the foreseeable effects *on the oppressed* of letting that system collapse. Suppose the final outcome of an efficacy/legitimacy crisis of global governance institutions is no system of global governance at all: a Westphalian world on steroids—with chemical and nuclear weapons, satellite-operated drone bombings, increasing resource scarcity, and more. A world like that may have potentially immense (and certainly unchecked) human costs, and these would certainly be paid first, foremost and disproportionately by the oppressed themselves.¹¹ Obviously, this does not make the current system excellent or just: being better than nothing is not what bestows normative standing to a system of governance.¹² However, it may be a decisive factor when debating what to do with that system in times of crisis. If, as in the example just given, the fate of the most oppressed members of humanity is what is at stake, then the choice between trying to reform the system or allowing it to collapse altogether must be made by taking into account the consequences that the

¹⁰ See Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

¹¹ See David Held, *Cosmopolitanism: Ideals and Realities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 148.

¹² See Buchanan, *The Heart of Human Rights*.

most oppressed would have to bear in either case—and the move from bad to worse is no good move.

Accepting that letting the system collapse is no good move, and assuming that if a system is to be normatively justifiable it has, at the very least, to be coherent with some of our most basic moral principles, how are we to go on? More precisely: what is the role and nature of cosmopolitanism for a gridlocked world?

It may be suggested that the role of cosmopolitanism should no longer be that of providing bright ideals to ascend to, but rather that of avoiding dark realities we do not want to sink into. In other words, cosmopolitanism in a gridlocked world will still provide prescriptions, as it has always done, but these prescriptions will have to be configured *given* the descriptive facts of that world and the structural factors that explain them—not *regardless* of them. The domain of cosmopolitan thinking will thus no longer be ideal theory.

A non-ideal cosmopolitanism will be less concerned with what moral and political outcomes we wish to achieve than with those we need to avoid: it will be mostly devoted to the search of principled ways to control the type of damages that humanity is in the process of inflicting upon itself (to paraphrase Judith Shklar).¹³ Another way to put the same point is this: non-ideal cosmopolitanism will stay faithful to the notion that all human beings are morally equal and thus worthy of equal political consideration, but it will no longer work on the assumption of institutional progress. It will fully acknowledge that recognizing the equal moral status of all human beings also entails facing the

¹³ Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in Nancy L. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

concrete circumstances that threaten the political relevance of such recognition in a gridlocked world.

An example of this approach is Leif Wenar's work on fair trade.¹⁴ Traditionally, the task of cosmopolitanism in regards to this issue has been that of asking abstract questions: What makes trade fair? Should fair trade be understood interactionally or institutionally? Should fairness in trade be strictly related to the idea of the modern state? Should fair trade be grounded in the ideal of reciprocity? These are theoretically fascinating questions but providing an answer to them is clearly not going to improve our prospects of resolving the most pressing global injustices that are today connected to the trade regime—any more than providing abstract theories of the nature of mind will help us cure brain cancer. Wenar asks a different set of questions: not “what is fair trade?” but rather “what kind of trade practices concerning which specific products are particularly pernicious for the basic interests of the global poor?” Wenar starts not from what trade should ideally be to be fair, but from what can be changed about specific aspects of the trade system in order to avoid some of its most glaringly unfair outcomes.

In the current international trade regime, Wenar argues, at least when it comes to trade in natural resources “might makes right.” The individuals who control a territory can legally sell its natural resources independently from the way in which such control has been achieved and perpetuated in time. This institutionalized feature of the international trade regime incentivizes authoritarian forms of political organization, worsens the economic prospects of affected populations, and makes most

¹⁴ Leif Wenar, *Blood Oil: Tyrants, Violence, and the Rules that Run the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

citizens in middle- and high-income countries directly complicit in severe human rights violations affecting millions of the world's most oppressed people.

Wenar's non-ideal approach shapes the nature of the analysis and of the potential solutions that he puts forward. The basic normative proposal suggested by Wenar is popular resource sovereignty. According to the latter, it is the people of a country who own its natural resources. What is key about this proposal is its moral minimalism. The view is animated by the idea that we should reject "might makes right"—an idea that is near the heart of morality itself. While going beyond "might makes right" may have disruptive consequences on the trade regime in its current form, one need not be very idealistic to accept that objective as a morally plausible starting point. Furthermore, popular resource sovereignty is intuitively powerful and explicitly supported by several important international legal documents. Finally, popular resource sovereignty is congruent with some of the most important political values of international society, for example the importance of internal and external self-determination.

One of the main strengths of Wenar's proposal is that the normative assumption he builds on are morally extremely 'thin' and, for that reason, all the more solid. Another strength of Wenar's proposal is that it constantly strives to individuate political feasibility paths—by, for example, checking for the compatibility of suggested policy reforms with the wider regulatory system (including the WTO), by individuating real-world actors that would benefit from the proposed reforms, by considering the strategic implications for the foreign policy of some of the most important players in world politics, and by suggesting ways of minimizing the potential adverse impacts of policy reforms on stability and economic welfare.

These are the strengths of non-ideal cosmopolitanism, to be further developed in a highly complex, gridlocked world: theoretical make-do and focus on practical deliverance. Non-ideal cosmopolitanism starts not from what we should hope for but from what we can and cannot live with; and then focuses on how to concretely achieve what can concretely be achieved. This is not to abandon principles and aspirations but to show awareness that sequencing, too, is a central feature of moral progress, particularly when the reality in which that progress is to be pursued has become disorientingly complex; and that genuine moral concern must ultimately deliver morally valuable results, not just well-articulated theory. For that reason, it can dictate priorities that do not necessarily reflect the traditional scheme ‘idealize first, realize later’.

Non-ideal cosmopolitanism will advise a rebalancing of the kind of priorities that political theorists take to be relevant in their work. This is probably the most powerful lesson that political theorists should draw from *Gridlock*. There is no accurate, plausible or useful political theory that ignores structural facts about the world we live in, and which does not strive to identify the relevant stakeholders and feasible institutional paths for the kind of morally motivated changes that it suggests. This does not mean that all searching for a glimpse of perfect cosmopolitan justice (or similar lofty ideals) should stop: but it does mean that such search should not be the main, let alone the only concern that a cosmopolitan political theory should have. Even if imagining perfect justice is part of the cosmopolitan philosophical mission, it may not necessarily be the most urgent or even the most important task for cosmopolitans to take up in a gridlocked world.

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